

“My emotional reservoir isn’t filling as fast” Teachers’ exhaustion 18 months post-earthquake

Veronica O’Toole PhD, University of Canterbury (veronica.otoole@canterbury.ac.nz)

Abstract

For 150,000 Christchurch school students, the 12.51 pm earthquake of 22 February 2011 shattered their normal lunch time activities and thrust their teachers into the role of emergency first responders. Whether helping students (children) escape immediate danger, or identifying and managing the best strategies for keeping children safe, including provision of extended caregiving when parents were unable to return to school to retrieve their children, teachers had to manage their own fears and trauma reactions in order to appear calm and prevent further distress for the children in their care. Only then did teachers return to their families. Eighteen months later, twenty teachers from across Christchurch, were interviewed. At 12.51pm, the teachers were essentially first responders. Using their usual methods for presenting a calm and professional image, the teachers’ emotion regulation (ER) strategies for managing their immediate fears were similar to those of professional first responders, with similar potential for subsequent burnout and negative emotional effects. Teachers’ higher emotional exhaustion and burnout 18 months later, were associated with school relocation. Lower burnout was associated with more emotional awareness, ER and perceived support.

Consistent with international research, teachers’ use of cognitive reappraisal (re-thinking a situation) was an effective ER strategy, but this may not prevent teachers’ emotional resources from eventually becoming depleted. Teachers fulfill an important role in supporting children’s psychosocial adjustment following a natural disaster. However, as also acknowledged in international research, we need to also focus on supporting the teachers themselves.

Research Question & Mixed Methods

How Christchurch teachers functioned as first responders at the time of the disaster and their perceptions of their emotional management at the time, and in the early aftermath as recalled and on their personal and professional functioning eighteen months later. Twenty teachers from across the city of Christchurch, 26 to 65 yrs (mean 44 yrs), teaching experience 2–32 yrs (mean 17.15 yrs; SD 10.05), 15 primary (incl 2 special needs), 2 secondary, 2 ECE & 1 tertiary, all MoE Sub-Areas represented (except for Northeastern).

Why Emotion Regulation Eighteen months later?

To keep going, to maintain their teaching persona, “because that is what teachers do.”

How?

By applying similar emotion regulation strategies as used at the time of the disaster. But these states were less optimal than preferred and the teachers were feeling more tired with burnout indicators of emotional exhaustion being evident. It was taking more energy to maintain



“So I was wandering around checking out lunchboxes and letting children go off to play and I remember hearing the rumble and feeling the movement and you know how you have this instant, ‘Is this going to be a big one or not? Is it just a small aftershock?’ And you could feel the force and you could feel that it was quite difficult to stand up and I could see the children look at you instantly and because you’re dressed in fluoro, they instantly can find you looking for what to do. And I was shouting and using my hands, “Get down, get down, get down. Just wait.” But the noise became so intense, it was like a train coming right through the



school playground and I have images in my mind of a couple of children who had been at the far end of the playground, running towards me”.

“Our playground suddenly became like a trampoline. It literally was like a trampoline and like a huge giant thumping underneath a trampoline. That’s what it was like and I was saying to the children, “Turtle...Turtle,” but it was impossible. We were bouncing around like ping pong balls. One little boy just clung round my neck, hands round my neck and his feet round my back and the other two were sort of holding onto me”.



<https://quakestudies.canterbury.ac.nz/store/object/171942>



“The noise was incredible, there were sounds of fire-alarms and sirens and masonry falling – you could hear smells that didn’t smell right. It was very dusty and almost electrical smelling. I could hear a clatter of bricks and it was like I imagine if you bounced loose bricks up and down on top of each other – that’s what I was hearing”.

Port Hills: “I thought we were going to die. I saw rocks. I saw sheep just bolting from the paddock up on the hill. I saw dust. I heard screaming from the primary school just above us.”

Photograph (top) courtesy of the teacher’s personal collection.

References

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Table 1:
EQC Contexts for Participating Teachers

Context	Number of teachers ^a
In relocated schools	9
Will be directly ^a impacted by MoE Edu Renewal plan	6
School & home in same suburb	2
Immediate devastation of both home & school	6
Living in Eastern Suburbs & City	6
Moved out of home permanently	4
Moved out of home temporarily	9
Will have to move temporarily	7
Had to deal with EQC	19

^a Numbers add up to more than 20 as some teachers reported more than one context.

their desired positive state for their teaching. Their love of teaching has likely mitigated their exhaustion but should not be taken for granted.

How did they do it at the time?

“You just did it. You just had to. You became now not only the teacher but you became the caregiver of these children. It wasn’t a hard thing to decide. ...you just did it.... I don’t know, it just came out of nowhere. I don’t have any children of my own, so these are my children... you’re just in so much overdrive and adrenaline that you don’t have time to think about it.”

“Fear would well up and it was just a luxury that you just didn’t have time for. It really was a luxury. And it really felt like a luxury. ...I think there was a very clear decision in my head in the same way, that you don’t get

Table 2: Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) comparing differences in post-earthquake functioning between those exposed and not exposed to negative earthquake related events for emotion regulation and burnout.

	Exposed to Physical Danger		Home Relocation		School Relocation	
Variable	Mean Diff.	F; p	Mean Diff.	F; p	Mean Diff.	F; p
Emotion regulation	0.49	5.39; .03	0.09	0.11; .74	0.09	0.14; .72
Burnout	0.05	0.02; .89	-0.60	2.38; .14	0.69	3.55; .07

NOTE: N = 20; Mean Diff. = Difference of mean scores between exposure to earthquake related event minus not exposed to earthquake related event. F; p = MANOVA values and tests of statistical significance.

to answer the phone and tell your friends and family that you’re ok – that you need this battery power for these kids that are in your care. So it was a real stamping down kind of emotion...you’re just stamping it down that you don’t get to feel this now and that what you need to do right now is that for these kids that they need to know that you think it’s ok.”

“It was quite a separating process because there was an internal person who was quite freaked out, but there was very much the external professional kind of face, and the only time that that got close to slipping was when you made eye contact with another adult.. and you’d in the moment actually be yourself and [then]. No. hang on! You can’t afford this because the kids around you, are all looking to you to go, ‘Is this ok? If you’re ok, we’re ok.’”

Back to work 3 weeks later

“I was really apprehensive about getting back into the classroom, because it had frightened me so much and the children. It was hard

getting the children to go back in that environment and so for a few days, we did lots of outside activities just slowly bringing them in – that was really frightening for them. I think they thought that they were going to die that day or what, I don’t know, but it was really traumatic for them and then every little [aftershock] after that, they’d try and run outside ... We just wanted desperately to get back to some kind of normal.”

In their own words 18 months on

“If you thought of your emotions as a reservoir, that gets topped up, I would describe my emotions as ‘I’m less resilient now’ at an emotional level. I feel like my reservoir isn’t filling up as fast as I’ve used draining it.”

“I’m normally the sort of person that bounces out of bed and I haven’t been. I don’t bounce out of bed any more. It’s like my emotions are more neutral. Does that make sense? They’re either sad or neutral; mostly they’re neutral.”

Table 3: Number and type of responsive strategies at the time of the earthquake

Responsive strategies	Number of teachers reporting the strategy ^b	Examples of strategies
Behavioral	11	Deep breaths, keep calm, calm face, reassure children, talking to children, holding children, distraction, carry on, put on teacher hat, squash the emotion, stamp down the emotion, put on a front, fake it until you make it
Attention deployment	5	The children took our lead and were singing, we put on a DVD
Cognitive	18	Self-talk – pull yourself together, how can I calm all these children? Right so I’m still alive, right I’ve got a job to do, you’re a professional classroom practitioner. Thoughts/beliefs: the children come first, it’s always an act, you become someone different
Automatic	6	You just did it, you had to do it, it just came from nowhere, we just had to carry on, it’s what teachers do, I guess automatically you step in
Social cognitive	2	I took the lead from others, it was the people around you [that helped]
Adrenaline	7	So your adrenaline would go up and your adrenaline kicked in, you’ve got all this adrenaline going, it was just adrenaline and your adrenaline kicked in
Peritraumatic dissociation	2	A conscious decision that I didn’t want to be traumatized by seeing death and injury, I was almost disconnected from it

^b Numbers add up to more than 20 as some teachers reported more than one strategy.

“I have this outward appearance of confident, calm, and I’m passionate about my teaching, but deep down, yeah, it’s just falling apart all around me. It’s that uncertainty. The scary thing is with schools closing, 300 teachers are affected.”

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Recommendations

1. Understand the potential for a hometown disaster to increase teachers’ job demands, emotional exhaustion and burnout.
2. A social-emotional follow-up programme and time out, for Christchurch teachers to reinvest their wellbeing and resilience.
3. Incorporating research-informed education about emotions and emotion regulation into disaster planning training, to optimize teachers’ wellbeing and resilience post-disaster.

Mood Meter Findings

The mood meter was shown to each teacher, so that they could indicate how they were feeling in terms of energy level and degree of pleasantness of this in two different situations. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, each teacher plotted their feeling state (or affect) as coordinates on the graph. For example, one teacher said, I feel +3 for pleasant, +3 for energy, and this feels ‘happy’”.

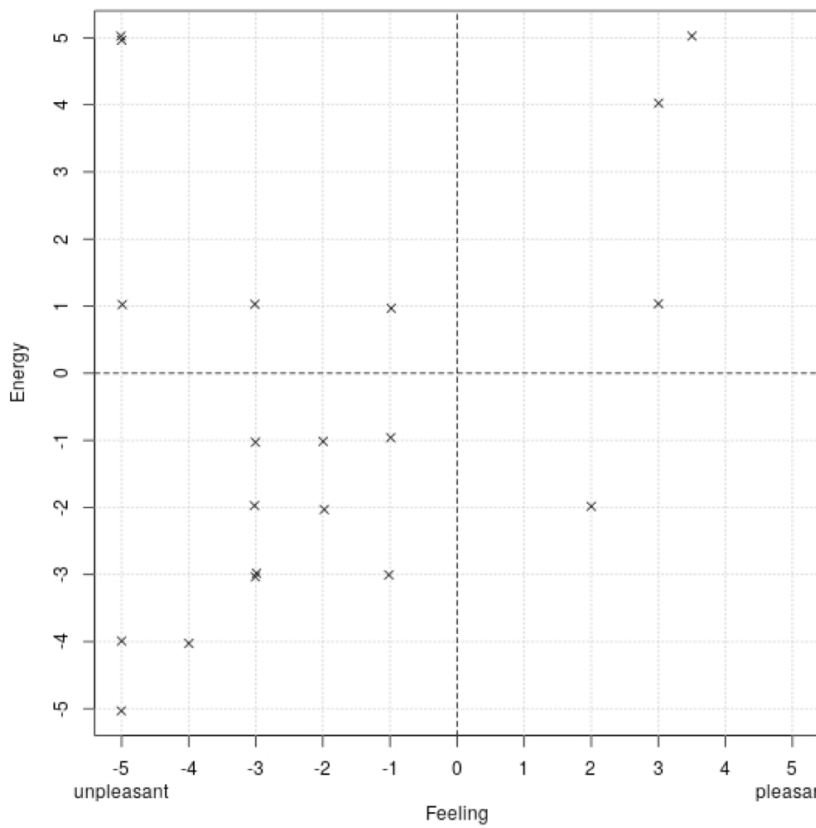


Figure 1. Teachers’ mood meter ratings of their core affect in the early aftermath of the earthquake. Note: coordinates in bold indicate more than one teacher selected the same coordinates.

Positive states: Empathy & enjoyment of being able to support role (also felt exhausted). Hopeful up till June (but felt hopeless after June), acceptance, keeping children safe

Negative states: Pumped, adrenaline high but dropped below – in 24 hours, fear, adrenaline, grieving, tired, tearful overwhelmed, exhausted, let down, grief, depression, protective & practical, cranky, impatient, emotionally drained, anxious, strung out, overloaded, run down, anger, frustration, coping, fearful, exhaustion

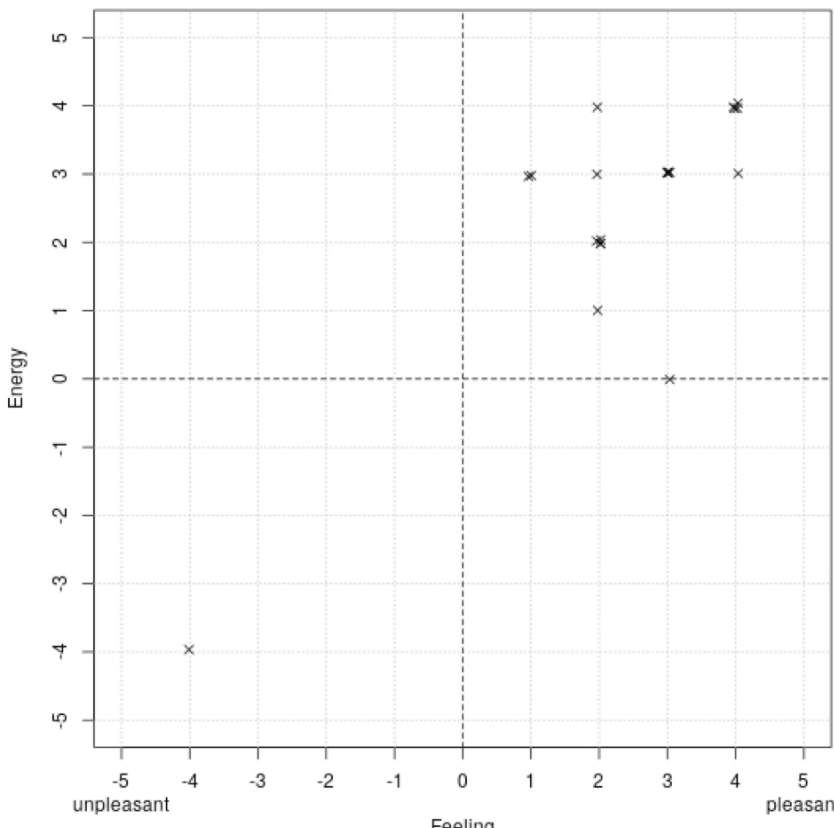


Figure 2. Teachers’ mood meter ratings of their core affect as experienced during their current teaching. Note: coordinates in bold indicate more than one teacher selected the same coordinates.

Positive: Happy, teaching persona presenting an image, normalizing for the children, but more tired, recharging, mediocre - would like more enthusiasm, less than usual teaching persona, safe, comfortable, normalizing, calm, happy, normal but flatter, having fun with the kids to bring mood up, thinking “this is it, so run with it”, feeling positive, enjoying teaching, excited, anticipation, hope, anticipation. **Neutral energy** but pleasant “lost my mojo”

Negative: Fragile, tired, overwhelmed, tearful, resentment, sadness, anger